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ABSTRACT

The perceptions of academic deans of environmental factors that predict their perceived fit at their institutions were studied. The dependent variable was the deans' level of agreement with the statement that the university was a good place to work, a statement operationalized as an indicator of perceived fit. Data were collected from 821 deans as part of the 1996 National Survey of Academic Deans in Higher Education. Some of the significant independent variables appeared to be things outside the immediate control of the deans. Deans are likely to have little input into financial support for the institution. Deans do have a large degree of direct influence over the relationships within their colleges and universities, and the perceived quality of relationships between faculty and staff, faculty and students, and among top administrators were the strongest predictors of whether a dean perceived the institution to be a "good" place to work. Steps that can be taken to increase a dean's perception of the institution as a good place to work were derived from survey responses. Suggestions relate to improvements of private fundraising efforts, lobbying state legislatures for adequate funding, and considering "fit" when hiring deans. (Contains 3 tables and 26 references.) (SLD)

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The Importance of Relationships in Deans' Perceptions of Fit:

A Person-Environment Examination

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The Importance of Relationships in Deans' Perceptions of Fit: A Person-Environment Examination

The "shelf life" of academic deans is rapidly declining as fewer faculty members are willing to serve in leadership positions (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). When academics do decide to serve as leaders, they do so for increasingly shorter lengths of time than in the past. With higher education in a time of constant systemic change (Astin & Astin, 2000), frequent turnover in leadership results in discontinuity, lack of long-term vision, and difficulty in maintain momentum for positive growth (Guskin, 1996; Wolverton & Gmelch).

Holland (1966, 1985) theorized that the congruence between an individual's personality and his or her work environment—that is, the "fit" a person feels at work—affects job satisfaction, career achievement and stability, and persistence in a position. Congruence between an academic dean and his or her work environment influences the level of stress perceived by deans, which in turn influences job satisfaction (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). Understanding what makes a "good fit" for an academic dean, therefore, will allow colleges and universities to decrease negative stress, increase overall job satisfaction, and increase stability and persistence for deans.

The purpose of this paper is to examine deans' perceptions of environmental factors that predict the deans' perceived fit at their institutions. The dependent variable was the deans' level of agreement with the statement, "This university is a good place to work," which was operationalized as an indicator of perceived fit. Implications for increasing deans' perceptions of fit based on the results of this study are discussed in the paper.

Theoretical Perspective

In 1935, Lewin posited the interactionalist perspective when he wrote that behavior is a function of characteristics of the person and the environment [$B = f (p \times e)$]. This perspective underpins many theoretical models of career development (Holland, 1985) and organizational behavior (Caplan, 1983), and remains a major focus of vocational psychology (Day & Bedeian, 1995; Spokane, 1987).

Under Lewin's (1935) model, an individual's behavior is considered a function of the interaction between the person and the environmental. A positive balance, or fit, between the person and environment may result in positive behaviors, such as stability and satisfaction (Holland, 1966, 1985). Conversely, a poor fit between a person and an environment may result in negative behaviors. To change the perceived fit, institutions can adjust the person or the environment, or both (Evans, Forney, & Guido-Dibrito, 1998).

The "fit" individuals perceive between themselves and their work environment also can influence stress levels (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002) and overall job performance and satisfaction (Day & Bedeian, 1995). Others (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000; Vandenberg & Nelson, 1999) connect satisfaction levels with stability in academic positions. If the interactionalist perspective (Lewin, 1936) holds, institutions can decrease perceived stress through policies and practices that improve fit by influencing the environment. The resulting increase in satisfaction may decrease turnover. Empirical research that explores what environmental conditions are most conducive to fit for academic deans must inform policy and practice.

Review of Literature

The literature related to academic deans provides some perspectives on the individuals currently holding the position, but much is left to be discovered. Much of the literature that does address academic deans focuses on roles and responsibilities (e.g., Tucker & Bryan, 1991), not on issues of job satisfaction or stability. The research literature directly related to satisfaction and stability, unfortunately, often considers academic deans as part of a larger population of academic administrators. This practice allows for only indirect understanding of academic deans. Research by Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) is one notable exception, adding to our understanding of this population by focusing specifically on academic deans.

Roles and Relationships of Academic Deans

Much of the literature related to the academic dean position reads like a laundry list of tasks peppered with sage advice from current and former academic deans. Tucker and Bryan (1991) for example discussed budgeting, performance evaluations, and fund raising in their list of functions a dean must endure. Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) included lists of responsibilities categorized as resource management, academic personnel management, internal productively, personal scholarship, leadership, and external/public relations.

Tucker and Bryan (1991) argued for deans to assume the "dispassionate detachment" (p. 169) commonly assumed in a corporate manager, especially in work-related relationships. The authors negated the notion of collegiality and advocated instead for a business model of communication and interaction. In their limited discussion of fit, Tucker and Bryan focused on the role of budget, promotion and tenure

decisions, and autonomy in creating a positive work environment for deans, focusing only limited attention to relationships with professional colleagues.

Unlike Tucker and Bryan (1991), others (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002; Wolverton, Gmelch, Montez, & Nies, 2001) focused the examination of the functional roles of academic deans in the context of role stress and career satisfaction. These authors examined the relationships between stress and role conflict, role ambiguity, and lack of professional training. Their findings indicated that increased role conflict and ambiguity may lead to increased stress. Further, Wolverton et al., concluded that increased training for academic deans could decrease levels of role stress.

The research relating functional roles and stress (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002; Wolverton et al., 2001) highlights the importance of personal and professional relationships for academic deans. Deans do not maintain, nor should they maintain, the dispassionate detachment suggested by Tucker and Bryan (1991). Deans are leaders of dynamic people-driven organizations; lack of attention to personal and professional relationships within these organizations will ultimately increase job-related stress (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002).

Research Related to Satisfaction

As stated previously, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002), most of the literature related to the job satisfaction of academic deans fails to separate the deans from other academic administrators. So, although the research discussed below provides a context for understanding satisfaction in higher education administrative positions, much of it does not provide insight specific to academic deans.

Researchers must disaggregate the category of academic administrators in order to study deans more specifically.

In the most recent study of administrative satisfaction in higher education, Volkwein and Zhou (2002; 2003) used structural equation modeling to examine predictors of satisfaction for approximately 1,200 administrators. Volkwein and Zhou included 24 independent variables related to the state characteristics (e.g., size, wealth, and political culture), campus characteristics (e.g., size, quality of faculty, perceived administrative autonomy), personal characteristics of the administrator (e.g., sex, age, length of service, administrative division, and personal stress), and perceived work climate (e.g., control, adequacy of funding, administrative teamwork, and interpersonal conflict). Dependent variables included measures of intrinsic satisfaction, extrinsic satisfaction, interpersonal satisfaction, and overall job satisfaction.

Administrative rank, personal/family problems, interpersonal conflict, perceived level of teamwork, and job insecurity significantly predicted satisfaction for academic administrators (Volkwein & Zhou, 2002). Academic administrators reported no significant relationship between extrinsic satisfaction variables—satisfaction with income and opportunities for advancement—and overall job satisfaction. Intrinsic satisfaction and interpersonal satisfaction, however, directly predicted overall job satisfaction.

Although intrinsic satisfaction was the most powerful predictor of overall job satisfaction (Volkwein & Zhou, 2002), the significant relationship between interpersonal satisfaction and overall job satisfaction is particularly noteworthy for the current inquiry. The significant relationship between interpersonal and overall satisfaction highlights the importance of positive working relationships in increasing overall job satisfaction.

Perceived teamwork positively influenced interpersonal satisfaction. The presence of interpersonal conflict negatively influenced interpersonal satisfaction.

A related study by Volkwein and Zhou (2003) demonstrated the relationship between perceived work climate and overall satisfaction for academic administrators. Academic administrators indicated their satisfaction statistically significantly higher than administrators in institutional research, business affairs, human resources, or student affairs in the three areas of satisfaction: intrinsic, interpersonal, and extrinsic. Academic administrators rated administrative teamwork and interpersonal harmony most important to a satisfying work environment. According to Volkwein and Zhou, "organizational, environmental, and individual traits prove to be less influential [on overall job satisfaction of academic administrators] than the features of the immediate work environment" (p. 168), like teamwork and interpersonal harmony.

As part of a comprehensive study that included over 1,300 academic deans, Wolverton and Gmelch (2002), related job responsibilities and stress to overall job satisfaction. The authors found seven dimensions, related to various roles a dean must assume, that predicted overall job stress. These stress-related dimensions included administrative task, provost/supervisor, faculty/department chair, time/personal, scholarship, salary/recognition, and fund-raising stressors. In related research, Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, and Sarros (1999) concluded that

> clearly the greatest source of stress emanates from the paperwork, meetings, interruptions, and work load of academic deans [the administrative task function]. These stressors do not represent the exhaustive challenges of leadership but the

> day-to-day irritants that wear away at deans…distracting them from the important issues in academic leadership (p 736),

noting that balance was the key to administrative longevity and satisfaction.

These studies (Gmelch et al., 1999; Volkwein & Zhou, 2002, 2003; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002) share the underlying conclusion that job satisfaction and job stress are inversely related. Wolverton and Gmelch also concluded that "job satisfaction and person-environment fit are crucial determinants in work-related stress experienced by deans" (p. 74). The current study adds to this line of inquiry through the examination of person-environment fit for academic deans. It does so by including the importance of professional, collegial relationships, which have previously been overlooked or negated, into the variables that may predict satisfaction.

Methodology

Data for this inquiry were collected during the *1996 National Survey of Academic Deans in Higher Education* (Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, & Hermanson, 1996). Researchers utilized multiple regression analysis as the main statistical procedure to examine relationships between the dependent variable and independent variables. The following section describes the sample and statistical procedures in greater detail.

Sample

The sample included 828 deans at 4-year institutions in the United States. Data screening for outliers led to the elimination of seven cases for a final sample size of 821 cases. Approximately 60% of the deans were men (n = 482) and 40% were women (n = 325). The vast majority of respondents were Caucasian (n = 716; 88.8%), followed by African Americans (n = 50; 6.1%), Latino/Latinas (n = 23; 2.9%), and Asian Americans

(n = 15; 1.9%). Two respondents (0.2%) indicated Native American. Table 1 provides a tabular representation of the sample demographics.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Respondents appeared relatively young with moderate levels of experience in the dean position. The mean age of the respondents was approximately 54 years (M = 53.96, SD = 6.33). The respondents' ages, however, ranged from 31 to 76 years. The vast majority of respondents reported that they were married (n = 663; 82.4%); a variable that previously had been linked to differences in reported job stress and satisfaction (Gmelch, Reason, Schuh, & Shelley, 2002; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). The average experience for respondents in this sample was 5.58 years (SD = 4.44). Again, the range of experience was wide, ranging from less than one year to 27 years of experience.

Statistical Procedures

A forward, stepwise multiple regression procedure was used to estimate the relationship between the dependent variable and 20 independent variables. Independent variables were entered in four steps beginning with demographic variables (years as dean, ethnicity, marital status, age, and sex), followed by variables related to the deans' perceptions of their colleges. The third regression equation included independent variables related to the deans' rating of several positive characteristics of their universities. The final equation included two variables related to the public and private financial support for the institution and two variables in which the deans' rated their relationships with other senior administrators as well as their efficacy in their current positions. Table 2 provides all independent variables included in the final regression model.

Results

Table 3 presents the statistically significant standardized beta coefficients and model statistics for each regression model. Each successive model explained a greater amount of the variance in the dependent variable, as evidenced by the R-square statistic. The final multiple regression model that consisted of 20 independent variables was statistically significant ($F(20, 679) = 18.527$, $p. < .001$). The model included seven statistically significant independent variables and accounted for 35.3% of the variance in the dependent variable.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Significant predictors in the final regression model included the deans' ratings of the relationships between faculty and staff (COLL-A; $t = 4.75$, $p. < .001$), between faculty and students (COLL-B; $t = 3.32$ $p. = .001$), and between top administrators (SENIOR; $t = 3.83$, $p. < .001$). COLL-A and COLL-B were statistically significant predictors in each model in which they were included (Models 2 – 4). Other research has documented the importance of relationships on perceived stress of academic deans (Gmelch et al., 1999); the current findings appear to support and add to the understanding of the importance of relationships, especially in relation to fit and satisfaction.

A financially sound institution also was predictive of the deans' responses to the dependent variable, a finding supported by Volkwein and Zhou (2002, 2003). Statistically significant variables included items related to faculty salaries (UNIV-A; $t = 2.56$, $p. < .05$), the quality of private financial support for the institution (PRIVATE; $t = 4.09$, $p. < .001$), and the quality of state financial support for the institution (STATE; $t = 2.84$, $p. < .05$).

The deans' perceptions of the intellectual climate of the university (UNIV-B; $t = 2.56$, $p. < .05$) also statistically significantly predicted responses to the dependent variable.

Of equal interest are those variables that failed to reach significance. Demographic variables related to gender, race/ethnicity, age, and marital status did not reach significance in any regression model, a finding that may contradict other similar research (Clark & Oswald, 1996; Leong & Brown, 1995; Sanders & Mellow, 1990). College-level environmental variables, especially those related to relationships (i.e., COLL-A and COLL-B), were strong enough predictors to overcome initial differences based on years of experience (Model 2).

Discussion and Implications

Several of the significant independent variables might be outside the immediate control of the deans. Deans likely have only modest or no input into the amount of financial support from private donors or the state legislatures, although higher education institutions should focus efforts to increase both private and state funding. Deans, in conjunction with other institutional administrators, do possess some influence over the faculty salaries and the overall intellectual climate of the university through personnel policies and decisions, although these decisions may be constrained by existing policy or financial circumstances.

The deans do possess, however, a large degree of direct influence over the relationships within their colleges and universities. The perceived quality of relationships between faculty and staff, faculty and students, and among top administrators were the strongest predictors of whether a dean perceives the institution as a "good" place to work.

Suggestions for Implementation

Several steps can be taken to increase a dean's perception of his or her institution as a "good" place to work. Some suggestions pertain to institution-wide programs, outside the dean's sphere of influence, although a dean can positively contribute to institutional efforts. These suggestions relate to improvement of private fundraising efforts, lobbying of state legislature for adequate funding, and considering "fit" when hiring deans. The dean within his or her academic unit directly controls the implementation of other suggestions, including relationship focus and building, implementing a shared leadership style, and establishing high expectations for a scholarly community.

Institutions must focus on fund raising and lobbying. In findings similar to Volkwein and Zhou (2003), this inquiry found a statistically significant relationship between the financial health of an institution and the deans' perception of fit. Deans who indicated their institutions provided high faculty salaries and were given strong external support were more likely to rate their institution as a good place to work. Fund raising and lobbying to increase an institution financial health may also increase the perceived fit and satisfaction of academic deans.

Search committees should consider "fit" when hiring deans. Hiring decisions, especially those that are accompanied by tenure, may be the most important decisions that institutional administrators make regularly (Hynes, 1990; Wolverton et al., 2001). Both prospective deans and the hiring institution must conduct a "self-questioning process" (Tucker & Bryan, 1991) that examines the fit between the individual and the environment. Both sides of a hiring decision must honestly evaluate the fit based on

experiences and skills needed and sought; the agreement between the institutional expectations and candidate abilities; and finally congruence of the intangible aspects of the position, those that comprise the intrinsic satisfaction described by Volkwein and Zhou (2002), and the desires of the candidate.

Wolverton et al. (2001) suggest that institutional hiring committees may serve their institutions well to "look inside" (p. 97) for decanal candidates. While these authors cite the excessive time involved in external searches, the current inquiry might offer another justification for possible internal candidates: experienced fit. Internal candidates for academic dean positions bring with them, presumably, proven fit within the institutions. The internal hiring process has the secondary benefit of allowing an institution to "grow their own deans" (p. 97) through training, orientation, and socialization programs (Gmelch et al., 2002)

Deans should seek first to nurture relationships in his or her college. The overwhelming evidence of the current inquiry indicates that positive relationships within the immediate environment lead to perceived fit between a dean and his or her institution. The deans' relationships with faculty and staff members and other higher education administrators were positively related to perceived fit within an institution. Further, the deans' perceptions of the collegiality of relationships between faculty and students also predicted perceived fit. Collaboration between the dean, administration, and the faculty is essential (Glotzbach, 2001). Investing time and energy to increasing teamwork and interpersonal harmony (Volkwein & Zhou, 2003) may lead to greater job satisfaction and longevity for deans.

Deans should consider implementing principles of shared, or transformational, leadership. Although transformational leadership is associated often with organizational change (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989), the root of all transformational leadership is the relationship between leaders and led. Astin and Astin (2000) cite ten individual and group qualities of transformational leadership; seven of the ten involve relationships: collaboration, shared purpose, division of labor, disagreement with respect, creation of learning environments, empathy, and authenticity in relationships.

Deans, as transformational leaders, must focus on building collaborative relationships among faculty, staff, and students in order to foster leadership among all members of the college community. Given the importance of positive relationships in predicting deans' job satisfaction, a leadership philosophy that nurtures relationships would likely increase satisfaction.

Deans should set, and model, high expectations for a scholarly community within their academic units. The deans' perceptions of the intellectual climate of an institution statistically significantly predicted their level of perceived fit. Although personal scholarship is one area of stress for deans (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002) and is often neglected in favor of administrative tasks (Gmelch et al., 2002), deans may increase their level of fit through setting and modeling high intellectual expectations.

Conclusion

The romantic notion of the loner academic (Rudolph, 1962/1990) or detached manager (Tucker & Bryan, 1991) does not fit the deans in our study. Deans' perceptions of their university as a positive place to work are influenced by the relationships of those around them. Formal and informal programs that enhance the relationships within a

college or university likely will lead to more positive feelings toward the university. Possible interventions include retreats that focus on teambuilding and relationship building and formal mentoring programs.

Colleges and universities, and the deans themselves, can influence the perceived fit that a dean feels within an institution. Policies and practices that improve relationships, even relationships to which the dean is not a direct party (e.g., faculty and students, faculty and staff), will likely increase the perceived fit for the dean. This is true, according to this study, regardless of gender, race, age, or length of tenure for the dean.

If we accept Holland's theory (1966, 1985) and Lewin's interactionalist perspective (1935), policies that affect the environment must influence the behavior of the person. This research suggests that changing the environment by focusing on the relationships of individuals in the college and university will have the greatest impact on the behavior (perceived fit) of the deans.

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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n = 821)

	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Mean	SD	Valid n
Race/Ethnicity					806
Caucasian	716	88.8%			
Native American	2	0.2%			
Latino/Latina	23	2.9%			
African American	50	6.2%			
Asian American	15	1.9%			
Missing	15				
Gender					807
Male	482	59.7%			
Female	325	40.3%			
Missing	14				
Marital Status					
Married	663	82.4%			805
Not Married	142	17.6%			
Age			53.96	6.33	797
Years as Dean			5.58	4.44	812

Table 2. Independent Variables included in the Regression Models

LABEL	VARIABLE
Step 1:	
Demographic Variables	
AGE	age of dean
GENDER	sex of dean
MARRIED	marital Status (married/not married)
RACE	race/ethnicity of dean
YRS-DEAN	years in current position
Step 2:	Statements rated 1 = poor to 5 = excellent (reliability alpha = .60)
College Variables	
CALL-A	personal relationships between college faculty and staff
COLL-B	relations between faculty and students in dean's college
COLL-C	academic ability of students in dean's college
COLL-D	quality of faculty in dean's college
Step 3:	Statements rated 1 = poor to 5 = excellent (alpha = .66)
University Variables	
UNIV-A	faculty salaries
UNIV-B	intellectual climate
UNIV-C	academic standing among peer institutions
UNIV-D	quality of instruction
UNIV-E	racial climate
UNIV-F	gender equity
UNIV-G	quality of location of university
Step 4:	Statements rated 1 = disagree to 5 = agree (alpha = .40)
Finances and self-perceptions	
PRIVATE	This university has a strong private funding base.
STATE	The state has a strong financial commitment to the university.
SENIOR	I work well with other senior administrators.
GOOD	I am doing a good job at my present position.

Table 3. Statistically Significant Standardized Beta Coefficients and Model Variables for Forward, Stepwise Multiple Regression Models*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Demographic Variables				
AGE				
GENDER				
MARRIED				
RACE				
YRS-DEAN	0.091			
College Variables				
CALL-A		0.217 **	0.192 **	0.171 **
COLL-B		0.117	0.131 **	0.121 **
COLL-C		0.121 **		
COLL-D		0.164 **		
University Variables				
UNIV-A			0.142 **	0.088
UNIV-B			0.293 **	0.234 **
UNIV-C				
UNIV-D				
UNIV-E				
UNIV-F				
UNIV-G			0.073	
Financial/Self-perceptions				
PRIVATE				0.143 **
STATE				0.092
SENIOR				0.137 **
GOOD				
R2	0.016	0.188	0.309	0.353
Change in R2		0.171	0.121	0.044
F	2.319	17.703	19.095	18.527
Model Significance	0.042	<.001	<.001	<.001

*All variables significant at p. < .05; unless otherwise indicated.
** p. < .001

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